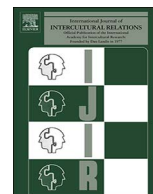




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When worlds collide: Academic adjustment of Somali Bantu students with limited formal education in a U.S. elementary school[☆]



By Dina Birman^{a,b,*}, Nellie Tran^{c,*}

^a Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, School of Education and Human Development, University of Miami, 5202 University Dr., Coral Gables, FL 33146, USA

^b Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, 18 Kremlevskaya Str., Kazan 420021, Russia

^c Department of Counseling and School Psychology, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Dr, San Diego, CA 92182, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a two-year ethnographic study of newly arrived Somali Bantu refugee students in a U.S. elementary school (K-6) in Chicago. These data paint a detailed picture of students' behavioral and academic adjustment to school, and the drivers behind "behavioral incidents" (instances when children's behavior presented a problem for school staff) and their academic engagement or disengagement. Bantu students required a degree of flexibility and accommodation from their teachers, whose attitudes toward acculturation could generally be characterized as "assimilationist" (requiring students to conform to U.S. culture and school rules) or "multicultural" (respecting and accepting the students expressing their heritage culture at the school). This study illustrates the difficulties faced by refugee students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) when adjusting to U.S. schools, and the pressures placed on teachers and other school staff. Strategies used by teachers in working with SLIFE are described. These findings also extend the literature on the academic engagement of immigrants to this group of SLIFE. In this study, SLIFE were disengaged not because of disinterest or resisting adult expectations at school but because they were unfamiliar with the culture of schooling and did not have the academic background necessary to complete school tasks. The study also illustrates the need to provide schools with adequate support to accommodate the needs of SLIFE.

Introduction

Refugee students with interrupted or limited formal education face particular difficulties in adjusting to U.S. schools (SLIFE, DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). Many refugee children resettle in the United States after extended stays in refugee camps with few opportunities for schooling (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). It is estimated that 20% of all English Language Learners (ELLs) in high school and 12% of ELLs in middle school have missed two or more years of schooling (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Such students are at high risk for school failure, particularly if they come from cultures without traditions of literacy and formal schooling (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002). Though students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) represent a growing population in schools in the United States and other countries where refugees resettle, only a few studies to date have documented African refugee

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* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: d.birman@miami.edu (B.D. Birman), ntran@mail.sdsu.edu (N. Tran).